

The Shamanic Sentinels of the Himalayas: Uncovering the Dogras' Mystique

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In the sprawling expanse of the northwestern Himalayas, where the Pir Panjal range stretches towards the plains of Punjab, and the Chenab river flows through the verdant valleys of Jammu, Himachal, and Pakistan's Punjab province, resides a distinct group of people known as the Dogras. Despite their language, Dogri, being a recognized language of India¹, and their valiant contributions to the nation's military heritage through the legendary Dogra battalion, the Dogras remain an enigmatic presence, overshadowed by the other identities of the region. For too long, the state of Jammu and Kashmir has been synonymous with Kashmir, while the Dogras, who call this land home, have remained in the shadows. Yet, their history whispers tales of a storied past, with hints of a forgotten legacy that stretches back to the dawn of the Indian civilization, echoing the whispers of the proto-Vedic era and resonating with the vibrations of the Vedic age. Who are the Dogras, really? Are they the descendants of ancient Vedic tribes, or a unique blend of cultures forged in the crucible of the Himalayas, with roots tracing back to the earliest inhabitants of this land? Let us embark on a journey to unravel the mysteries of this lesser-known people, and uncover the secrets of their fascinating heritage.

Although the term Dogra has seen diminished usage in certain areas of the ancient Duggaradeś, the land of the Dogras, today, its historical significance is broad and profound. The term encompasses a rich history rooted in ancient texts and inscriptions, as well as a diverse cultural heritage that spans across various regions and communities.

The origins of the term Dogra have long been a subject of debate among historians. Various theories have been proposed, yet none have provided a completely satisfactory explanation. However, two 11th-century copper plate inscriptions from Chamba² reference the Sanskritized form of the term as "Durgara," affirming that Dogra is indeed an ancient appellation. This connection to "Durgara" suggests a deep-rooted historical identity, long predating modern interpretations.

The history of the Dogras is further enriched by accounts from ancient historians. Arrian, in his record of Alexander the Great's campaigns, mentions envoys from "Doxares" who met the Macedonian prince near the Jhelum River³. A plausible syllabic shift from 'X' to 'G' would

render "Doxares" as "Dogre." These people may have been referenced by Ptolemy as residing in Serike, bordering the Ithagoroi⁴. Additionally, St. Martin noted a kingdom by this name in the Shivaliks⁵, yet the precise root of Dogra remained elusive.

One plausible etymological progression that I propose is as follows:

Tokhar → Tokar → Thokar → Thogar → Dogar → Durgar → Dogrā

This theory reflects a logical development and is supported by historical usage in the Duggar region. The transition from "Tokhar" to Dogrā is marked by significant linguistic and cultural shifts, encapsulating the dynamic history of the people who came to be known as Dogras.

To further explore this etymological journey, it is crucial to examine the historical relationship with the term "Tokhar." The neighboring tribes of the Chinese region, collectively referred to as Kush (akin to the Khasas), were designated by the Chinese as the Yuezhi⁶. This tribe, spreading from Lake Lopnor to Kashmir, was also known as Rishik in the Puranas and later as Kushan, Khoshan, or Khojano. These were the Tokhars, referred to as Thod-kar or Tho-gar in Tibet, and as Tokharoi (Ancient Greek: Τόχαροι) or Thaguroi in ancient Greek⁷.

The name "Tokhara" appears in various ancient texts, including Chinese sources where it is transcribed as Tukhara (吐火罗 Tuhuoluo or 覩货罗 Duhuoluo)⁸. The name evolved from "Tuhuoluo" to "Duhuoluo," reflecting phonetic changes from 'T' to 'D' and 'K' to 'G,' paralleling the linguistic transformations observed in the Dogra identity.

The Tokharas were recorded by Strabo and other Greek authors, as well as Latin writers. In Chinese sources, the Yuezhi are referred to as Tokhars in Xinjiang. Pliny the Elder mentioned a Central Asian group known as the 'Tagoras,' who migrated westward with the Yue-che hordes in the 2nd century BC⁹. The historian P.C. Bagachi links the word Dogar with Tokhar, suggesting they were the same people. Similarly, S.P. Tolstov observed that the word Tokhar evolved into Duker in Turkey. Notably, a town founded by this clan in Turkey after their migration from Central Asia bears names such as Doker, Duger, Döger, Döker, or Düger¹⁰. This historical reality is corroborated by their continued presence in Central Asia today.

Further support for the Dogra identity comes from the Dogra hills, where the Thakkars—also known as Thokars, Thogars, or Thakurs—are related to the Khasa race, which has ties to the Kushans, also known as the Takṣak¹¹. The Dogras use a script called Ṭākārī¹², named after these Thakkars, with variations found throughout the Himalayas. The term Tokhara (Tocharos in Greek) is derived from the Alanic word "toxar" (pronounced Ṭōkhar), meaning 'warrior' (with "tox" meaning 'war' in Alanic)¹³. The Tokharas were known for their warrior skills, similar to the Dogras' renowned fighting abilities.

Originally warrior clans, the Thakkars (or Thogars) evolved into Dogars and eventually Dogras. Over time, Dogra came to represent all people within their domain, regardless of caste or social class, including Brahmins, Rajputs, and others. The Rajputs and Brahmins of the Himalayan hills have their origins to the Khasas¹⁴, who were eventually linked to the

Tocharians. Collectively, they are known as Dogras, but in terms of individual identities, they are identified as Brahmins, Rajputs/Thakkuras, or other groups.

In Sanskrit and indigenous literature, these Tocharians were known by various names: Tokhār, Tuṣār, Takṣak, Ṭhakkar, Ṭhākur, Turuṣk, Ṭakk, Tarakṣ and Tugr. The true origin of the word Dogra reveals that the Dogras are essentially Tokhars with a Khaśa base, who played a crucial role in shaping the history and culture of the Himalayan region.

The geographical scope of the Dogra region is equally significant. Historically, the area from Taxila to Una (district of present day Himachal Pradesh) can be considered part of the Dogra region. In a broader sense, this "land of the Dogras," which can be called Ḍuggaradeś or Sanskritized Durgaradesh, was a confederation of six ancient powerful Jānapadas: Ṭakk, Dārvā-Abhisāra, Madra, Trigarta, Gabadikā and Odumbara¹⁵. Though these Janapadas seemed to be six in number, they encompassed thousands of smaller fortified kingdoms¹⁶. In present terms, this region includes the people of present-day undivided Jammu province, a significant portion of undivided Punjab, and major areas of Himachal Pradesh.

The Dogras, with their deep historical roots and warrior legacy, have left an indelible mark on the cultural and historical landscape of the Himalayan region. From their origins as Tokhars to their evolution into a unique identity, the Dogras' journey reflects a complex interplay of linguistic, cultural, and historical factors. Today, the term Dogra encompasses not just a specific group of people but a rich and diverse heritage that continues to shape the identity of the region.

The Dogras are often celebrated for their military prowess¹⁷, but this strength is deeply intertwined with a profound spiritual foundation. Their spiritual practices, rooted in a proto-Vedic religion, are a unique blend of shamanism, animistic rituals, and Tantra, incorporating Śaivite and Śakta elements. Despite adopting Vedic and Puranic beliefs, many Dogras, including those who converted to Islam, retain aspects of their ancestral practices, highlighting a continuity of their ancient spiritual heritage.

In the ancient Himalayan societies, particularly among the Khaś communities, which include the Dogras, societal structures were fluid, especially among the first two varnas, with power being distributed irrespective of traditional varna designations. This mobility is exemplified by the revered Rishis, such as the Saptarishis—Ātri, Bhāradvāja, Gautama Mahārṣi, Jāmadagni, Kaśyapa, Vāsiṣṭha, Viśvāmitra¹⁸—whose lineages form the gotras of various castes, blurring the lines between Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and others. These sages transcended varna boundaries, often marrying across castes and even with supernatural beings, leading to descendants belonging to different jātis.

This fluidity persists in Khaś Himalayan societies like the Dogras, where shamans can emerge from any varna, and indigenous practices diverge significantly from established Hindu norms. The regional variations in dharma and rules reflect the unique spiritual landscape of the Himalayas, where what applies in one Janapada may not hold in another. Yet, common norms for marriage and social customs are present across all castes, underscoring a shared cultural foundation.

The rich idea of Dogra spirituality is evident in the presence of priests from various communities, including the Thakkura, who perform a range of religious duties. The line between the first two varnas is often blurred in the hills, a phenomenon reflected in texts like the Manusmṛti and the Rājatarāṅgiṇī. This flexibility in social and spiritual roles is rooted in the proto-Vedic origins of these communities, who retained their unique dharma even as they interacted with broader Vedic traditions.

Shamanism, a key aspect of Dogra spirituality, is defined as a visionary tradition that uses altered states of consciousness to connect with divine forces in nature. Shamans, revered for their ability to navigate other realms and return with profound insights, act as intermediaries between the spiritual and physical worlds¹⁹. This practice, believed to be one of the earliest forms of religious expression, involves inducing trances through various methods like fasting, meditation, chanting, and drumming.

The terminology for shamans varies across cultures, with Dogras referring to them as čelā, doālā, jhākārī, pacelā and saugāṇī. Similar practices are found in regions like Kashmir, Ladakh, and the Western Karakoram, where shamans are known by different names but share a common spiritual role. These diverse terminologies underscore the widespread presence and significance of shamanic practices in different societies, highlighting their ancient roots.

At its core, Shamanism is animism in practice, rooted in the belief that nature is filled with spiritual entities and that all cosmic elements are interconnected. A shaman's role as an intermediary is crucial in maintaining balance and harmony within the community. Shamanism is not only prevalent in tribal societies but remains relevant today, offering pathways to personal and communal enlightenment. It transcends modern religious boundaries, inviting individuals to explore self-discovery and spiritual awakening.

In Dogra regions, shamanism incorporates elements of Tantrism and Dhyāna Sādhana Sūtrās, showcasing a sophisticated spiritual practice that integrates multiple layers of religious thought. Through these practices, shamanism continues to evolve, meeting the spiritual needs of various communities around the world. It offers a transformative journey of self-discovery, urging individuals to connect with the timeless wisdom that has guided humanity's spiritual quest.

The ancient religion of the Dogras is essentially a cosmogony rather than a strict code of ethics. Polytheistic creeds, by their nature, tend to be devoid of ethical significance, focusing instead on the worship of natural forces and physical manifestations. This separation of religion from ethics allows for the healthy development of moral rules as societal perceptions evolve. However, it also makes it challenging to preserve the religion in its original purity, as the Dogras have historically integrated elements from other cultures into their own spiritual practices.

As various religious cults intermingled, their gods naturally merged into a shared pantheon. Despite the influx of new cults, local gods retained their significance and were revered as more powerful. These indigenous deities were either malevolent, requiring appeasement, or benevolent, offering benefits. In either case, the approach was to incorporate new deities into the existing array without necessitating a lifestyle change or rejection of old gods. The

Dogras feared tangible consequences from their deities and sought both material and spiritual assistance. Their gods were displeased not by disbelief or sin, but by neglect; they demanded propitiation through sacrifices and rituals. As long as these duties were fulfilled, offerings to other gods were seen as an additional precaution against misfortune. The Dogra pantheon is vast and diverse, comprising deities of varying ranks and roles. Devotees typically choose a specific deity to venerate, allowing for the seamless integration of new gods into their belief system. This flexibility enabled the effortless incorporation of new deities at lower levels without diminishing the stature of those at the top. Over time, the relative honor accorded to each deity became a matter of personal preference. Consequently, the Dogra pantheon has always been receptive to the gods of neighboring cultures. Whenever the Dogras encountered different forms of worship, they often assimilated them into their own, occasionally even granting precedence to the new deities. For example, Hindu Dogras venerate the saints of their Muslim neighbors and sometimes refer to their indigenous gods by Muslim names unfamiliar to Himalayan languages. This openness to new deities reflects the Dogras' adaptable approach to spirituality, where local and foreign gods are frequently worshipped together.²⁰

The territorial nature of many gods facilitated their inclusion in broader Hindu worship, particularly as people sought to propitiate local powers when entering new territories. The gods of the Dogra hills were, and many still are, undoubtedly territorial, reflecting the nature of Hinduism in the Himalayas. For them, the tribe's territory likely defined the boundaries, especially in the absence of physical barriers like mountain ranges.

If speaking of the place of worship then among the Dogras, special places are dedicated to a wide range of deities, including *Devī*, *Devatās*, *Śivjī*, *Nāg*, *Yakṣa*, *Gandharva*, *Nāth*, *Siddha*, *Yoginīs*, *Bīrs*, *Pitr*, and many indigenous deities. One of the most significant and widely worshipped deities among the Dogras is *Bawa Kaliveer*, also revered as *Duggar Deśādhipati* or *Devatā Śiromāṇī*²¹. He is present in one form or another in every Dogra household. Alongside him, *Mātā Malā Devī*, *Mātā Kalkā* and *Nāgas* are also prominent deities, with temples dedicated to them in every village. Temples dedicated to these deities are often found in groves or under sacred trees and may not be cut down, emphasizing the connection between spirituality and nature.

The serpent-gods, or *Nāg*, hold paramount significance in Dogra worship, embodying fertility and reproductive forces. Nag shrines are ubiquitous, frequently situated near springs, which are believed to be under the tutelage of these deities. The shrines typically feature stone carvings depicting human forms, often encircled by a snake and surmounted by a serpent canopy. Alternatively, the shrine may comprise a spiral snake motif and a nearby snake's burrow. The shrine's accouterments typically include stone and iron snake figures, accompanied by a trident, lamp, incense holder, weapons such as a sword, and an iron chain or *sangal* – considered an emblem of *Devta* and utilized by devotees for self-flagellation. Notably, these iron chains, or *sangal*, also appear in temples dedicated to other indigenous Dogra deities.

Springs of water are thought to be under the influence of snake deities, and in some parts of the Dogra hills, springs and wells are so closely associated with snake spirits that the term

"nāg" is commonly used to refer to a spring of cool, refreshing water²². Typically, springs are found near most of Dogra temples. Many deities are believed to have the power to bring rain, and during droughts, they are fervently worshipped.

During the annual Mela of all deities, vigils or *jāgar*—shamanic trance practices—are conducted at the temples. Guggul incense is ritually burned, and sheep and goats are sacrificed to appease most deities, while others accept only Satvik offerings. These rituals, based on shamanic principles, include offerings, music, and dancing, with the *čelā* or shaman serving as the intermediary between the deity and the worshippers. Each temple has a *pujara* or priest, who may belong to any caste. In the upper Dogra Hills, Brahmins and Thakkuras often serve as priests, but with the deity's consent, priests of other castes may also be appointed.

Blood sacrifice takes precedence in the rituals of most Dogra deities. A *čelā* or shaman performs circumambulation within the temple, accompanied by the ringing of bells, the sound of the conch shell, and the beating of drums. During the ritual, the *čelā*, seated at the Devta's place, becomes a vessel for the god or goddess, entering a state of divine inspiration. As the drums reach a fever pitch, the *čelā* begins to tremble, signaling the deity's presence or their own ascension to the cosmic realm. With *sangals* or a *trishul* in hand, the *čelā* performs shamanic rituals, often assisted by a *sewadar* who fans them. As the *čelā* reaches a frenzied state, they leap up and dance, self-flagellating with the *sangal* or *trishul*, sometimes drawing blood in a symbolic act of devotion. The wild music crescendos, and others join in the dance, forming a circle around the *čelā*²³.

A goat is presented, and a ritual cleansing begins: water is sprinkled on its body, followed by the washing of its feet. Flowers and rice are showered upon the goat, accompanied by an invocation in the name of the deity—Mata, Bawa, or Naga, depending on the recipient of the offering. The priest utters a plea: "*Leī leī, koī bhull ho'ī ho'e te māf kareyān, leī leī*" ("O deity, accept our offering, and forgive us if we have erred"). The goat's response is crucial: if it shivers ("*Bijjna*"), the offering is accepted; if not, the deity's displeasure is inferred. In the latter case, the assembly seeks forgiveness, and a Shaman or *čelā* intervenes to appease the deity. The ritual culminates with the severing of the goat's head and liver, offered to the deity, and in some instances, the *čelā* imbibes the warm blood. As the dance reaches a frenzied pitch, the *čelā* announces the deity's arrival. A hush falls over the crowd as they pose questions, which the *čelā* answers as the deity's mouthpiece.

Upon completion of the ceremonies and sacrifices, the ceremonial distribution of the offerings takes place. The *pujara* (priest) receives the head, while the *čelā* (shaman) gets the shoulder. The *Jogis* and *Gardis* (drum beaters and Dev Mahima singers) are presented with the entrails and cooked food as a token of appreciation. The remaining portions of the animal are shared among the offeror, their family, and the *birādarī* (clan). Additionally, the monetary and dry grain offerings are equally divided between the *pujara* and the *čelā*. This *jagra* ceremony is always held in conjunction with a *mēl* (annual fair), which typically takes place once a year at each shrine, fostering a sense of community and spiritual connection.

Ancestor worship is a deeply ingrained tradition in the Dogra hills, manifesting in diverse and

distinctive ways. The veneration of the dead is universal, categorized into two types: sainted and malevolent ancestors. Revered ancestors are honored with small shrines in fields and larger ones for clan ancestors, often accompanied by temples dedicated to their memory. These ancestors are worshiped as deities, with names such as Data, Sati, and Bua²⁴, and their worship frequently aligns with Shamanic practices.

Furthermore, there is a belief in appeasing animals mistakenly killed, which are believed to return as spirits. Shrines are erected for these animals, and they are worshiped as deities. Similarly, spirits of individuals who died by accident or violence are believed to cause physical problems and are worshiped as deities with the assistance of shamans. This practice reflects the belief that the living acquire merit by enabling the dead to reunite with their ancestors.

Memorials, such as monoliths or engraved stones, are common near Dogra villages, commemorating the deceased and providing a resting place for their spirits. Bāolī²⁵ (stepwells) are constructed, featuring a slab with a carved figure of the deceased and a spout for water. Some of these structures are large and intricately carved, serving as merit-making acts for future bliss rather than public utility.

In summary, Dogra spirituality is a rich and intricate blend of shamanic practices, proto-Vedic traditions, and regional variations in dharma. It demonstrates a profound link between the spiritual and physical realms, with shamans crucially maintaining this balance. Even with the integration of Vedic and Puranic elements, the Dogras have preserved their ancestral spiritual heritage, which remains central to their religious practices. This fusion of ancient and evolving traditions highlights the Dogras' lasting spiritual strength and their pursuit of ultimate truth and harmony.

References :

¹ Dogri was recognized as a scheduled language of India under the 92nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 2003, and is one of the 22 officially recognized languages of India.

² Introduction to the History and Culture of the Dogras By A. H. Bingley, W. B. Cunningham, A. B. Longden. Ajaya, 1979, p.9

³ Alexander and His Successors in Central Asia by A.H. Dani and P. Bernard, 1994, p.79

⁴ All India Dogri Writers Conference New Delhi Souvenir Committee, New Delhi, 1970, Ancient People of Duggar by H.R. Pandotra, p.37

⁵ Ibid. p.37

⁶ The history of Afghanistan. T Runion, Meredith L. (2007), Westport: Greenwood Press, p. 46

- ⁷. Alphabet A Key To The History Of Mankind by Diring, David, 1948, p.348
- ⁸. Central Asia and non-Chinese peoples of ancient China by Pulleyblank, Edwin G. (Edwin George), p.425
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- ¹⁰. Ahmet Turan Türk Kültürü Araştırmaları Doğu Ve Güneydoğu Anadolu, 1992, p.45
- ¹¹.Praktika Tes en Athenais Archaiologikes Etaireias Tou Etous-1907 by Sakellrioy, P.D., p.59
- ¹².Linguistic Survey of India by Grierson, G.A., 1967,p.638
- ¹³.The origins of Russia by Vernadsky, George, 1959, p.50
- ¹⁴. The Holy Himalaya: A Geographical Interpretation of Garhwal, By Nitya Nand, Kamlesh Kumar, 1989, p.109
- ¹⁵. Duggar Ka Itihaas, Shiv Nirmohi, 1998, p.19-21
- ¹⁶. History of the Panjab Hill States Volume 1, By John Hutchison, Jean Philippe Vogel · 1994, p.12-20
- ¹⁷. The Dogras are often celebrated as gentleman warriors, embodying a unique blend of nobility and martial prowess. Their reputation as esteemed soldiers is matched by their deep sense of honor and respect. This distinguished blend of chivalry and strength has been a hallmark of their legacy, reflecting both their dedication to duty and their commitment to upholding high ethical standards.
- ¹⁸. The Saptarishi, or "Seven Sages," are revered figures in Hindu tradition, representing the most enlightened and influential sages. They play a crucial role in guiding and shaping spiritual wisdom. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (2.2.6) provides a list as Atri, Bharadvaja, Gautama Maharishi, Jamadagni, Kashyapa, Vasishta, and Vishvamitra.
- ¹⁹. Shamans of the 20th century by Heinze, Ruth-Inge; Berney, Charlotte, 1991, p.6
- ²⁰. Among the Dogras, there is a deep-rooted tradition of syncretic worship that transcends religious boundaries. This is evident in the veneration of Muslim saints, who are revered alongside Hindu deities. In fact, some Hindu deities have been attributed with Muslim names, highlighting the cultural integration that characterizes the Dogra community. For instance, Varun Devta is also known as Khizer Khawaza, reflecting a blend of Hindu and Islamic traditions. Moreover, prominent spiritual figures like Yogi Ratan Nath are respected with titles that bridge both faiths, such as Haji Ratan Nath or Ratan Al-Hindi. These titles demonstrate the harmonious coexistence of diverse religious influences within Dogra society, illustrating a unique cultural synthesis that has evolved over centuries. This tradition of syncretism among the Dogras not only underscores their inclusive approach to spirituality but

also enriches the cultural taste of the region.

²¹. Kuldevta Shri Kaliveer - Kaliveer Chalisa Sahit, A Study Based upon Extensive Field Survey Folk Ballads, Folk Stories, | Folk Beliefs, Rituals & Customs connected with The Tutelary Deity of Millions. SHRI KALIVEER By Om Goswami, 2015, p.140

²². Duggar Ki Bawalian By Shiv Nirmohi Akshay Prakashan, New Delhi, 2021, p.3

²³. The traditional Dogra dance performed in a circular formation is known as the Kud dance. This folk dance is an integral part of Dogra culture, often performed during religious and community celebrations. ²⁴

²⁴. The Dogras place special emphasis on honoring their ancestors through dedicated prayers and rituals. They pay particular attention to the Bua, Daata, Daatis, and Satis, who hold significant spiritual and cultural importance within their tradition. These figures are revered and remembered through various ceremonies, reflecting the deep respect the Dogra community has for their lineage.

²⁵. In Duggar, a bawali is referred to as 'Baan.' Other synonyms for it include - Boli, Baawdi, and Naun, etc. A Bawali refers to a small reservoir constructed near a spring or springs using stone blocks or rocks.
